

author of Ice Planet Barbarians

RUBY DIXON

SLICE OF
LIFE SHORT
STORIES

CALM

ICE PLANET BARBARIANS

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A SLICE OF LIFE SHORT STORY

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CONTENTS

CALM

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Author's Note

MOVING DAY

The People of Ice Planet Barbarians

Ice Planet Barbarians Reading List

Afterword

Copyright

CALM

One morning, gentle Maylak wakes up and feels a sense of oncoming dread. As the tribe's healer, it is her job to ensure that everyone is safe, happy, and healthy...and they are.

So what can be threatening her people?

This is a short story set in the ICE PLANET BARBARIANS series and does not stand alone. It should be read after BARBARIAN'S TOUCH and is a little bit of sweetness and family life for those waiting for the next release.

MAYLAK

Unease wakes me from my sleep. I turn over in the furs, unable to get comfortable. The feeling does not go away, and I open my eyes, gazing at the ceiling of my cave.

Something is wrong. It is not the shivering distress that my khui sends through me when another is dying. It is something softer, something about to happen. This is the prick of unease that comes with a slower, creeping worry, like starvation or sickness.

My hand goes to my belly and I search deep inside, letting the healing of my khui flow. It touches the little one nestled inside my body, and finds him well. My belly is low and my bones ache, which tells me that soon, my kit will arrive. After many seasons of waiting, I am both relieved and excited to hold my little son in my arms, but he is not what wakes me this morning, then. I look over at Esha's bed, directly across from ours. My little daughter sucks her thumb in her sleep, her eyes closed. She is peaceful and her color is good. It is not Esha, then. I relax a little.

At my side, my mate nuzzles my neck. "Maylak?"

I brush my fingers over Kashrem's dear face. "I cannot sleep."

“Is it the kit? Will it be here soon?” His hand caresses my belly.
“Shall I ready a basket for him?”

“Not yet,” I tell my mate, and caress his horn absently. “It is something else.”

He props up in his furs, looking down at me with worry in his eyes.
“Something else?”

I nod and begin to get up from our furs. Kashrem jumps to his feet and helps pull me to mine, as I am ungainly with kit, and my body feels like a stranger’s. He holds me for a little longer than necessary, worry in his gentle face.

I stroke his jaw. “I must check on the tribe, my mate,” I whisper to him.

Kashrem nods. He, more than anyone else, understands my moods. He knows that I worry over each person in our growing tribe as if they are my own kits. He knows that I will not be able to rest until my khui has sung to each of theirs and determined that they are well. All too vividly, I remember what it was like to watch the khui-sickness race through our people, and my own khui not yet awakened into its healing powers. Then, I was powerless, and we had no healer.

Now it is different, and I must do what I can.

My mate helps me into my tunic and kneels to help me into my boots. I cannot bend to the ties, so he does it for me, his hands gentle. He is so good to me, my Kashrem. Always patient, always gentle, and takes care of Esha when I am busy...and with so many new ones in the tribe, it seems I am always busy. It warms my heart to see so many families growing, but it is also exhausting for only one healer.

As if he can sense my thoughts, Kashrem finishes tying my laces and stands, a stern look on his face. “You will not exhaust yourself?”

“I will not,” I promise.

The look he gives me is clearly skeptical. “You are near your time and tired. If you start to feel—”

“I know, my mate.” I pat his cheek and smile. “Trust the healer to know her own body.”

“I trust the healer, but I also know my mate,” he says calmly. Esha wakes up and rubs her eyes, and he squats, holding his arms out for her. “I will watch the little one today. She is going to help her father prepare some skins, aren’t you, my little one?”

My sweet daughter just giggles and flings herself into Kashrem’s arms. She rests her cheek on his shoulder and then smiles at me. “Can I *keess* you, mama? The humans do it.”

Oh, with the lips? I hold my hands out for my daughter, and she flings herself into my arms and presses her tiny mouth to my cheek. She slobbers all over my face, and I remain patiently still, though I see my mate smirking with amusement. “Which human did you learn that from, Esha?” I ask when she is done.

“Jo-see,” Esha proclaims happily. “She is always *keessing* on Haeden. Why do you and Father not *keess*?”

“Because we are not human,” I explain to her, ruffling her mane and then handing her back to Kashrem. I am not entirely sure that I will ever embrace the human custom of tonguing at my mate. It seems... strange. But Esha’s kisses are sweet and fill me with joy, and I give her a quick, dry kiss on her round cheek. “Be good for your father. I will be back soon.”

Kashrem smiles at me, and my heart squeezes with affection for my mate. On impulse, I reach out and caress his arm, searching. I send my thoughts through his body, searching for his khui. Each one has a slight song to it, even when not in resonance, and I search for that song now, mixed in the pulse of flowing blood and thumping heart. Kashrem’s is there, and it is strong. Normal. I breathe a sigh of relief and pull back into myself. A moment later, I touch Esha’s arm and do the same, just because I must reassure myself that my family is well. When I am satisfied, I drop my hand.

My mate is watching me with a look of concern on his face. "What is it that troubles you?"

"I do not know yet. It might be nothing." But it does not feel like nothing. "I must seek the others. I will return soon enough."

He nods and strokes my arm, a reassuring caress. "Let me know if you need me."

My sweet mate. I smile. He cannot do much more to help with a healing than hold my hand, yet he would do so if I asked. "Have fun with your skins," I tease, and pinch Esha's fat little cheek to make her giggle. It is hard to leave my family's side, even for a moment, when my senses are calling a warning.

But is not the entire tribe my family? Are they not mine to care for?

I caress my kit's cheek one last time and then emerge from our private cave a moment later. I must bend slightly to exit because the door is low, and when I straighten, my back protests. I close my eyes and speak to my khui, going inside myself for a moment. Warmth blossoms through my muscles, and the pain is gone a moment later.

"Oh, there you are, Maylak! Just the person I was looking for!"

I open my eyes and see the round, strange face of the human Jo-see. She beams a smile at me, her hands on her flat stomach. "You were looking for me? Do you feel ill, Jo-see?"

"No! And that's the problem! If I'm pregnant, at what point does morning sickness kick in? Liz says she gets it pretty much the moment the sperm meets the egg, but you know Liz. She's full of crap." Her big eyes gaze at me with worry. "You don't think anything is wrong, do you? I should be feeling something if I'm pregnant, right?"

"Let us see." I place my hands on her belly, feeling for the small spark of life there. Pregnancy is tricky, because the child in the womb has no khui. But the body around it can tell me much, and Jo-see's body brims with good health and life. I withdraw back into myself and smile at her. "Everything is fine. You must be patient."

She bounces from foot to foot. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m not so good with patient. It’s so hard, because I want to experience everything! And Liz has the pukes and I don’t.” She looks mournful. “I just can’t wait, you know?”

“Your wait is shorter than mine,” I tell her, amused at her impatience. To think that someone is eager to have all of pregnancy’s small sicknesses.

Her hands go to her mouth. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m not bitching, I promise. I’m just excited.”

“I know you are not—”

“I mean, it must suck really hard to be pregnant for like, three friggin’ years, bloated like a watermelon on the vine and—” Her eyes widen. “I’m making it worse, aren’t I?”

I do not know if she is. “What is a water-may-lon?”

She pats my arm quickly. “You know what? Never mind. It’s cool. You due soon?”

“Not today, I think,” I say, and smile at her. “How is your mate? Is he in the cave?” I should check him, especially. There are certain tribesmates I keep a close eye on, and Haeden is one of them. His khui is not his original khui, but was given to him when he survived the khui-sickness many turns of the seasons ago. He is healthy and strong, but a healer always worries.

The dreamy expression returns to Jo-see’s face. “Just went out hunting. He promised he’d come home early for—well, never mind.” She waves a hand in the air, flustered. “I’m just gonna be quiet now.”

I chuckle. Jo-see’s mouth races ahead of her mind, and mating to Haeden has not changed that. I glance around the cave to see who is awake at the early hour. Stay-see is near the main fire, along with Meh-gan, No-rah and Shorshie. They like to gather early in the mornings and drink hot tea and make root cakes. It is a strange, bland meal, but the humans love it. “Shall we join the others near the fire?”

“Sure.” Jo-see bounds ahead of me, full of energy like my Esha. I am so heavy with kit that just watching her move makes me tired.

I follow behind a few steps, heading to the fire. The humans look up and smile at me, their strange faces welcoming.

“Come and sit, Maylak,” Shorshie says, getting up from her seat and offering it to me. “Stacy is making cake.”

“Legit cake,” Stay-see agrees, and the smell of something sickly sweet rises from the pan she’s holding over the fire. The others lean in with interest.

“What is lee-git cake?” I ask. I rest my hand on Shorshie’s shoulder to take a seat, and let my khui touch hers. She is healthy...and carrying another kit. She and Vektal must have resonated once more and kept it to themselves. I smile down at her, pleased for my chief and his mate. I will keep their secret.

Shorshie chuckles. “It’s *cake* cake. Like dessert.”

“With frosting,” Stay-see announces. “I’ve been experimenting with hraku and the not-potatoes, and some of the seeds we’ve been gathering. When we get more fruit from the cave that Lila found, it is gonna be *on*.”

“You want frost on your cake?” I ask, confused. “They are eaten frozen?”

No-rah giggles at my other side, moving her kit from her breast to her lap, and switching her other child to her breast. “You guys are making Maylak more confused.”

I laugh absently, more interested in reaching out and stroking the fine, downy mane of fluff on Ah-nah’s head. The kit rests on No-rah’s lap, and the mother does not seem to mind when I touch her child. Ah-nah is strong and healthy. I casually brush my hand over No-rah, and she is well, too. Hearty. Less tired than when the twins were first born.

“Is this the frosting?” Jo-see exclaims, picking up a bowl and dipping her finger into a soft brown mush.

“It’s paint,” Meh-gan calls out just as Jo-see raises her finger to her mouth.

Jo-see freezes.

Stay-see and Meh-gan both burst into laughter.

“You guys are jerks,” Jo-see says, and licks her finger. Her eyes widen. “Ohmigod, that is so good!”

“Cake’s almost ready,” Stay-see says, using a long, carved tool to tap at the edges of her rounded cake. It is thicker and larger than the normal breakfast cakes, and I am curious as to what the difference is and why they are so excited.

It is just food, after all.

They pull it off of the fire with a collective “oooh,” and Stay-see cuts it into tiny wedges and puts them on small bone plates. She takes the frosting from Jo-see and carefully dabs a spoonful on top of each wedge. “It’s going to melt because the cake’s hot, but I figure no one cares, right?”

“Gimme,” Meh-gan says. “Just, gimme.” They laugh, and the cake is passed around. I am given a plate, and I ponder the sloppy, goo-covered wedge of “cake.” As I watch, Meh-gan picks up her cake, takes a bite, and then closes her eyes. She sets it back down again and carefully licks her fingers. “That is the best thing I have eaten since we landed.”

Now I am curious. I take a little nibble of the cake—and freeze. The texture is coarse and strange, and the awful sweetness of the flavor reminds me of meat that has gone bad. With great difficulty, I finish chewing my small bite and force myself to swallow. Around me, the others are finishing their cake rapidly and exclaiming to Stay-see about how wonderful it is. I hold my plate, unsure how I can get rid of it without offending Stay-see’s feelings.

“You are so gonna have to make that again,” Shorshie says with a little sigh. “Maybe for special occasions like a birthday or something.” Her kit begins to cry and Shorshie picks her up out of her basket.

I set my cake down on the floor of the cave and hold my arms out. “May I?”

Shorshie hands over Talie, and I cuddle the kit close, holding her high as my belly gets in the way. She is getting big, and every day she looks more and more like Vektal. I am amused that Talie has his strong nose and his coloring. This is what our kit would have looked like if we had resonated. She has some human features, but not many. It does not make me sad; I am happy with my Esha, and my Kashrem is the perfect mate for me. But I am pleased that my once-pleasure-mate now has a family of his own. He is a good male.

I close my eyes and reach out to Talie’s khui, but the child is strong and healthy. There are no problems, no reason for a healer to worry. I settle her on my knee so she can play.

Shorshie gives me a curious look. “Is everything all right?” She asks in a low voice as the others begin to chatter about flavors for cake and when they can next make one.

I nod and give her a rueful smile. “I am...I do not know the human word for it. I feel the need to check on everyone today.” I do not tell her the nagging worry that I woke up with. It might simply be that—a worry.

“‘Broody’ is probably the word,” Shorshie says, and gently pulls Talie’s hand out of my braids. “Let me know if you need anything, all right? I can speak to my mate.”

I hand Talie back, now that I am assured she is fine. “I will.”

The conversation continues around us, and more people come to the fire. The last of the cake is doled out, and others show up with their kits. I laugh and offer to hold children, making it seem as if I have no more need in my life than to hold each kit. The mothers are all too happy to let someone else take their kit for a few moments, and I

touch the khui of each one with my mind. All are healthy, and as I hand each child back, I touch the khui of each mother. They are all well.

The problem is not here, then.

I look around, thinking. "Are Har-loh and Rukh in the caves? Or are they at the Elders' Cave?"

"They're home," Jo-see says. "I saw Harlow yesterday, and I doubt they left overnight."

"I should go greet them," I say with a smile and begin the arduous process of moving my ungainly body upright. Har-loh is one with a khui that must work that much harder—there is a tumor inside her head that her khui keeps under control. Her khui is strong, but when she was with kit, her body was severely taxed. Is it possible she is pregnant again? And this time she will not fare as well? I think of Rukh, so wild and untamed yet, and their small son. I must visit them and make certain they are well.

"Want company?" Jo-see jumps to her feet.

"Oh, no, stay with the others. I am fine." I smile to take the sting out of my decline. "I am going to say hello, and then I must help my husband with his skinning." I straighten and head out of the clustered circle of women.

"Wait," Stay-see calls.

I turn around.

She picks up my plate, all smiles. "You forgot your cake."

"How silly of me," I murmur, taking it in hand. "Thank you, Stay-see. You are most thoughtful." Perhaps Har-loh will like the cake and I will not be forced to eat more of it. I clutch the small plate and wander through the cavern, heading for Har-loh and Rukh's private cave.

As I head to the far side of the tribal home, the sound of retching makes my healer senses prick. I turn, heading toward the cave that Leezh shares with Raahosh. The privacy screen is not in front of their cave entrance, but I can hear Raahosh murmuring to his mate from inside. It might be a private moment. I hesitate outside, holding my cake, and avert my gaze to be polite. “May I enter?”

“Oh good,” I hear Leezh say. “The healer. Now I *know* I’m dying.”

I know enough about this human to know that she exaggerates, but her words still send a pang of worry through me. Is Leezh the source of my worry?

I hear Raahosh snort, and then he appears, beckoning me in. “She has her morning sickness, that is all.”

From the spot on the floor where she is crouched, Leezh gestures with one finger at her mate, and then hunches over a bowl again, vomiting. “Dick,” she pants between dry heaves.

He moves back to her side, gently stroking the hair away from her face as she vomits. “You will be all right, my mate,” he murmurs, and rubs her back. “It will pass soon enough.”

“Take your time,” I tell them, setting the cake plate down near the entrance and then moving to the fur-lined basket near their bedding

where Raashel waves her tiny fists. I get down on the floor next to her—no easy task—and offer her my finger to grab. She takes it, and her khui sings out to mine, strong. I smile, because I always worry most about the little ones, especially after the death of Asha's little girl. I could do nothing to save her because she had no khui, and it haunts me yet.

As Leezh straightens and sips water, I reach out and brush a hand on Raahosh's shoulder. He is healthy.

He looks at me with a frown on his face, questioning.

“Shall I help your mate? Maybe my khui can calm hers.”

“My khui's fine,” Leezh declares, sitting back and resting for a moment. “It's my stomach that hates me.”

I chuckle and pat the ground next to me. “It might be easier for you to come to me than for me to come to you.”

Leezh nods and crawls over to plop down onto the ground next to me. She looks tired and drawn, and I put a hand on her. Carrying a kit strikes some harder than others, and Leezh has had a rough time of it. Still, she is strong and there is no worry to be found in her body, only a sour stomach. I send healing thoughts from my khui to hers, to calm the anger in her gut and ease some of the sickness. “You must drink more water,” I chide her, and then add, “and more tea. Kemli has a good one for taking care of angry bellies.”

“I think I tried it. The tea that tastes like shoe leather?” She makes a face. “I think I'd rather just puke.” Her face pales, and then she reaches for her bowl again. “Actually, maybe not.”

I sit with Leezh and Raahosh for a time. There is nothing I can do for Leezh's stomach that more water and time will not fix. We chat about hunting, and mates, and Raashel, who is one of the kits that looks more human than sa-khui. I brag on my little Esha, who is already learning how to work a skin with her father. And we discuss more pregnancies.

“I think I’m the only one that has resonated twice,” Leezh says. “Is that fast?”

“Mmm.” I think of Shorshie and her secret. “Not always. If the mother is healthy enough to carry another kit, it can happen even faster.”

Raahosh touches his mate’s flat stomach. “Can you tell us if it is male or female?”

Leezh grins at me. “We’re already arguing over names. I told him if it’s a boy, he can name it, but if it’s a girl, it’s all mine. I want to call her Aayla.”

“Ay-lah?”

“Yeah, after Aayla Secura. From the prequels. I mean, they were pretty shitty, but Aayla was a badass Jedi. And blue! It’s like a win-win.” Leezh rubs her stomach happily. “Not that my kid would be a Jedi, but it’s a pretty safe bet that she’ll be blue and badass, so I think it works.”

“Ah.”

“She does not understand your words, my mate,” Raahosh says. “And the only reason I do is because I have heard this many times already.”

“I am sure Jeh-die is a nice name,” I tell Leezh.

“Aayla. Not Jedi.” She just sighs and shakes her head at us. “Where are my *Star Wars* nerds when I need them?” Raahosh just snorts and gets to his feet, moving to pick up Raashel. As he does, Leezh gives me a curious look. “I don’t mean to be weird, but is that...cake by the door?”

Oh. I have forgotten about Stay-see’s food. I was hoping to quietly abandon it. “Yes.”

Leezh’s eyes light up. “Is there more?”

“I think it is gone,” I say, and then quickly add, “but you may have mine.”

She pumps a fist in the air. "I could just kiss you, Maylak."

I do not point out that I would like that about as much as I would like more cake.



HAR-LOH HAS a dirty smudge on her face, a tool in hand, and a look of concentration in her gaze.

"It is a what?" I ask, frowning down at the strange boxy creation she is working on.

"A *spays-heater*," she tells me. "For the brutal season. It makes its own heat. Well, in theory. I need to figure out how to make it get hot enough using the sakh *bah-tur-ees* without overheating." She sticks the shiny tool into the spays-heater and pries a slice of it off of the front. "Right now it kind of gets molten, but I'm close. I think. Right, baby?"

Rukh grunts in agreement, handing little Rukhar a carved bone rattle. "Warm." On a blanket near his father, the kit flails his arms, his tail flicking. He throws the rattle and then begins to crawl after it. A small, reluctant smile curves Rukh's grim face, and it pleases me.

Har-loh is looking at me as if she expects an answer, so I nod. "I see."

"I don't want to freeze when it gets cold." She pauses, and then tilts her head. "Well, colder. And with little Rukhar here, I want to make sure we're cozy."

"So you will be staying for the brutal season?" I know both Har-loh and her mate like to go to the Elders' Cave to get away. Rukh is still not used to so many people around. The brutal season will be difficult on him.

"We stay," Rukh agrees before Har-loh can speak.

"We will be glad to have you." I place my hand on her arm and give her a little squeeze of affection. I reach out to her khui, and find it

pulsing steadily. It is strong, but keeping Har-loh healthy takes much out of it. I send a bolstering wave of healing from my khui to hers before I remove my hand.

“I must get going,” I tell Har-loh and her mate. “I want to check on Ti-fah-ni and Salukh before the day gets too long.” I rub my belly, using it as an excuse to move along. “My feet are already tired of all this standing.”

“I walk with you, healer,” Rukh says, gathering up his son. Har-loh goes back to her box, pulling off another shiny layer.

As we get out of the cave, Rukh stops me. He glances back at his cave, then at me. “I have...worries.”

My senses tingle with dread. That strange, nagging feeling that has been following me all morning moves over me again. “Over Rukhar? He is doing very well.” I run a finger along the kit’s fat blue cheek. He practically hums with good health. “Or over the upcoming brutal season?” I place my hand on his arm casually. There are no problems. “Your family is fine, Rukh.”

His mouth sets in an unhappy line, and he holds his squirming son closer as he leans in. “Har-loh. I...worry. Resonance.”

“You resonated again?” So many kits will be coming to our small tribe. I can scarcely imagine it.

He shakes his head quickly, and there is fear in his eyes. “It my worry. Leezh—”

Ah. I understand now. Har-loh is the most fragile of the humans, and carrying Rukhar was hard on her body. I give him a reassuring squeeze on the arm. “I just spoke to her khui and it is fine. There are no problems.”

“Is...a way to stop more?” He caresses his son’s head, fierce love in his gaze.

“You do not want to resonate again?”

The look on his face is tortured. “Yes. But no risk Har-loh. She is... everything.” He clenches a fist over his heart, anguished. “I cannot lose her...”

“I know.” And I suspect he will not leave the caves unless there is a healer nearby. He will not risk his mate. “Perhaps you will not resonate again. Perhaps you will. Only the khui can decide.” When he looks troubled, I add, “Her khui will not allow the kit to destroy her. If she is not strong enough to carry, it will not happen again. And if it does happen, I am here. I am not going anywhere.”

Some of the tension eases from his face. He nods slowly and grips my arm tightly, then returns to his cave with his son. I watch him go, sorting through my emotions. I know how he feels. Some nights, I watch Esha sleep, terrified of all the things that could happen that could break a small, fragile body. And sometimes I stay awake and gaze at my mate, thinking the same thing. Our world is dangerous, and even though Kashrem is a tanner and stays near the cave most days, there are still many things that can happen. I worry. I always worry. The entire tribe is mine to protect, but Kashrem and Esha are *mine*.

I know Rukh’s fears well.

“Maylak,” someone calls, pulling me from my thoughts. “Healer.”

It is Bek. I head toward the sound of his voice, near the entrance of the cave. “I am here.”

He storms forward, an irritated expression on his face. “We need your healing. Harrec has sliced his hand open on his spear.”

“Again?” I take the arm he offers me and lean on him so I can walk faster. His khui is vibrant and stronger than most. It is not surprising—my brother has always been a fierce male. Of course his khui will be fierce as well. “What were you doing?”

He snorts, his steps impatient as he slows his gait to match mine. “I did nothing. *He* has hands like clubs. I merely tried to show him a better way to wrap his spear point.”

I chuckle. “You must be patient, brother.”

“I am.”

“With *others*.”

The grunt of acknowledgment he makes tells me that he does not agree, but he also does not wish to argue. We head out through the entrance and into the snows. The day is nice and mild, the wind ruffling my braids. In the distance, I see two or three of the hunters clustered together. It is odd—one of them is wounded and yet my sense of dread does not seem to be any greater. “I suppose Harrec could not walk to the cave himself so I could tend to his hand?”

“He could...if he did not pass out at the sight of his blood.” My brother’s voice is sour.

A small giggle escapes me. I had forgotten Harrec has such a problem. Hunting does not bother him, but one drop of his own blood and he is on the floor. “Of course. Well, I suppose it is a nice day for a walk.” I place a hand on the underside of my belly to support it. It is uncomfortable to walk so far, but I can endure it.

My brother is silent as we head up the ridge to where Harrec lies sprawled. I see Taushen and Hassen near him, crouching. Spear-making supplies are scattered in the snow. “Are you well?” Bek asks after a moment. “You seem...withdrawn today.”

“I am tired,” I tell him.

“That is not it.”

My brother knows me well. “And I worry, of course.”

“About the kit?”

I shake my head, my gaze fixed on Harrec. “Something feels wrong. I am not sure what. But I will find out.”

“Tell me when you do. If I can help, let me know.”

I smile at my brother. He hunts for us, and he is a good male. A good provider. I am sad for him in that the other humans have all started families and resonated, and there is nothing for my hot-tempered brother. I know he is jealous of their happiness. I know he still misses the quiet one named Claire. "I know. If there is anything that I need done, I will come to you. This I promise."

Then we are at Harrec's side and do not discuss it further. Bek helps me to kneel next to the fallen hunter, and I am relieved to see his color is good despite his stillness. In his breast, Harrec's khui thrums, as bright and pulsing as ever. I send healing songs through to his khui, encouraging it to close the wound in his hand and knit the flesh...and to wake him, because the others will tease him mercilessly if he does not stir soon.

Well, they will tease him mercilessly regardless.

Harrec is roused, and the others rib him about the cut, even as I wrap a strip of leather around it. The flesh is almost completely healed, but the cut was deep and will need to be protected overnight. I take this time to touch Taushen and Hassen both and find no issues. Bek sees me sneaking a quick brush of hands against the others. I suspect he knows what I am doing, but he says nothing.

My brother may not be patient, but he is understanding.

The elders are fine. Despite their age, they are as fit as any of the younger tribesmates. Warrek is teaching young Sessah how to craft a snare, and I run my hands over Sessah's head just to check him. All are fine.

Perhaps this is nothing but the worry of a heavily pregnant female. Broody, as Shorshie says. I do not know, but I will finish visiting everyone in the tribe before I will relax.

Haeden and Vaza are out on the trails and will not return to the caves tonight. Farli has taken her parents, Kemli and Borran, to the Elders' Cave so they can learn the gesture language that Li-lah speaks. I will worry over them until they return, but for now, there are others to check on. I think of my brother, and where his heart lies, and head for Claire and Ereven's cave.

I arrive just as Ereven is emerging, his fishing nets slung over his shoulder. He gives me an easy smile and touches my shoulder. "Healer. You are more full with kit every time I look at you."

"That is because I am," I tease back. That small skin-contact tells me that Ereven is not the cause of my worry, and so I peek past him into his cave. "I came to check on your lovely mate."

"She is with Tee-fah-nee and the one that cries all the time. Their mates are out hunting." He gestures at his nets. "And I am about to

join them. Claire wants fish tonight.”

I smile. “I will not keep you.” My mind already is racing ahead. The one that cries all the time is Ar-eeh-aw-nuh, and not the mate I would have chosen for Zolaya, who is always smiling and happy. His mate is nothing like that. When she first arrived, she cried because she hated the cold. Now she cries because she is tired and her kit is fussy. I can help with that, at least.

As Ereven departs, my back seems to squeeze tight, the muscles pulling hard in protest to all my walking. A hiss escapes me, and I pause, sending healing through my body. The aches disappear a few moments later and I can walk again. I shuffle forward. I am tired and want nothing more than to return to my bed and curl up in a nest of furs, but I can do that once I have eased my fears. I rub the underside of my belly again and head toward Ti-fah-ni’s cave.

The three women are seated around Ti-fah-ni’s fire, sorting through handfuls of seeds. Ar-ee-aw-nuh holds her kit Analay, rubbing his back as he cries. Claire sits with her legs crossed in front of her, belly gently rounded with the first signs of her coming kit. Ti-fah-ni is newly resonated and will not have a belly for moons and moons yet. They all look up at me as I enter, and Ti-fah-ni jumps to her feet. “Maylak! Come sit! You look tired.”

I bite back my irritation. Why does everyone tell me I look bad? I am just fat with kit. But I know she means well, and so I put a smile on my face. “I heard Analay is having a rough day and wanted to help.” Ti-fah-ni’s hands are strong on mine, and the healing pulse I send through her tells me she is well. I let her help me to her seat, settling between the two women.

Ar-ee-aw-nuh immediately hands Analay over to me, her mouth downturned in a frown. “He’s so fussy today. Is it my milk again?”

I rock the kit in my arms, sending warm healing through his little body. Of all the tribe, Analay worries me the most. His khui is not strong, and he struggles where others flourish. I have never shared this with the mother because it is something that can either get better

with time, or worse. There is no way of knowing, and to tell her my fears would only cause more worry. It is just another burden that a healer must bear, and so I watch Analay closely. The khui heals much, but it cannot heal all, and something in his mother's milk makes his small stomach hurt. I send my healing through to him to encourage his body to welcome food, but every day is difficult for him. "It is. He is hungry, but it upsets his stomach."

Tears of frustration rise to Ar-ee-aw-nuh's eyes. "Is my baby lactose intolerant? Can't you fix that?"

I shake my head, because I do not know these words. Milk is milk, and Analay does not like milk. "Perhaps when he gets older, he can eat meat if it is chewed well for him."

"There's a herb that settles the stomach, right? Maybe we can mash some not-potato with some bone broth and some of the herb and see if that helps?" Ti-fah-ni asks, looking at me.

"Kemli has one," I agree. "Analay is young for solid food, but perhaps it is worth trying."

"I'll go," Claire says, getting to her feet. She is graceful despite the rounded swell of her belly.

I reach out and put my hand on her stomach before she can move away. "How is your stomach?"

"I'm great." Claire's voice is shy. She puts a hand on each side of her stomach and gives a little wiggle. "Seriously, I feel wonderful. You don't have to worry about me."

"I am the healer. Let me be the judge of that." I say, even as I pull my hand away. I do not even need to touch Claire's skin to know she is in perfect health. Nor is fussy Analay the cause of my worries. It is something else. But what?

With my healing soothing his aches, Analay sleeps in my arms, and Ti-fah-ni comforts the distressed mother. Poor Ar-ee-aw-nuh. I know it worries Zolaya, who cannot help. He spends long hours hunting because it is something he can do, and this just puts more strain on

his mate, who is left with a crying child for long hours. No mating is ever perfect, but it is always hardest right after a kit is born. This, I know well. I think of myself and my Kashrem, when it seemed that overnight we went from lazy days in the furs to frantic swaddling changes and very little sleep. The first few turns of the moon are always difficult.

Claire returns a short time later with the herbs, and the women make a broth-and-root mash for Analay while I hold him. The first few bites he takes makes his little face pucker, but he manages to get a small meal down, and when I send my healing through him, I do not feel the gut-ache he normally has. "I think it is working. Perhaps feed some milk and some mash, and slowly you can move him over to mash entirely. He still needs the nutrients from your milk for now." I hand him back to his mother, who has a relieved look on her thin face. "And always come to get me when he is upset."

"I didn't want to bother you," Ar-ee-aw-nuh says, holding Analay close.

"I am the healer. It is my job to look after everyone." I smile at her and slowly get to my feet. "And it is only a touch of my hands."

"But doesn't it make you tired?"

I am surprised at her question. Of course it makes me tired. Every ounce of healing I give to another is pushing my khui to stretch a bit more, and sometimes it stretches too far. But...it is also my job, as healer. Every untreated wound, I feel in my heart. It is my duty to keep the tribe healthy and strong.

The tribe's last healer was my mother's sister, Nashak. She died in the khui-sickness from exhaustion, having extended herself and her khui too far. It was a good death; she died saving her people. I expect the same from myself. I will heal every cut, every wound, every stomach-ache until I can heal no more.

But there is worry in Ar-ee-aw-nuh's small face. I caress her cheek and send a little surge of healing through the tired mother as well. "I

would rather heal little Analay than hear him cry. Would you not, as well?"

She nods slowly, and then gives me a tired smile. "Thank you, Maylak."

I pat her smooth cheek. "I must go visit others. If he feels badly later, come and seek me out in my cave."

"I will."

I caress Ti-fah-ni's arm as I go, but there is nothing worrying inside her. The kit she carries in her flat stomach is growing every day and she is healthy.

Everyone is healthy. It is both relieving and frustrating at once, because the unease in the back of my mind will not go away.

I visit Mar-layn and Zennek and their small kit. They are healthy. I visit Aehako and his family. Also healthy. I run into a few hunters returning with a midday meal for their mates and come up with foolish reasons to pause them. Each one is healthy. I find Hemalo working his skins in front of the hunters' cave. He is healthy, if sad.

Everyone is healthy. So what is it?

I head for the back of the cave, where Asha is now settled with the only unmated human female, Mah-dee. Perhaps there is something troubling Asha. She has been bleak since the death of her little one. My heart aches for her. We were pregnant at the same time, but she gave birth too early, and even my healing could not stop it. Her kit died, born too soon, and Asha withdrew into herself. I gave birth to my Esha months later, and the rift between us was complete. Asha cannot forgive me, I think, for having what she wants so badly.

Today is no different than any other day. Asha is alone in her cave, the fire out. She huddles under the blankets, her eyes open and staring at nothing.

"Asha," I murmur as I enter. "It is Maylak. May I visit?"

“I do not care,” she says in a toneless voice.

I look around for a seat, but there is nothing I can lower my ungainly body onto easily. “Give me your hand?” I ask, deciding to remain standing.

She rolls onto her back. Her long, dark hair is a messy snarl around her face, and I wonder how long she has lain in bed. Days? A hand of days? She frowns up at me. “Why?”

“Because I am here to check on you,” I tell her bluntly. I extend my hand toward her and wiggle my fingers, indicating my impatience.

“Why does it matter?” Her expression is bitter. “If I am dying, then Hemalo is free. And there is one less mouth to feed for the brutal season.”

I say nothing, because I am not going to argue. She places her hand in mine, and it is strong, though I can feel the sorrow that radiates from her. I want to tell her that there is still pleasure to be found in life, in a mate’s arms, in the simple joys—but it would come from me, pregnant and with another kit back in my cave. She would not listen. And Asha’s mate has abandoned her. So I sigh and release her hand. “Where is your human friend?”

Asha snorts and rolls over. “I am not her keeper.”

I try another tactic. “I saw No-rah with her kits by the fire. She looked to have her hands full. You might offer to help her if you have time today.”

Her eyes narrow at me, but she pushes upright in bed and drags a hand through her hair. “Did she ask for me to help?”

The hope in her voice breaks my heart. “She did not,” I admit. “But I also think she is trying very hard to handle it on her own and is afraid to ask for help. But I think she would appreciate another set of hands.” I rub my belly because my back is starting to ache. “And she likes your company.” I did, too, before everything changed.

Asha stares past me for a moment, thinking. Then she slowly pushes the blankets aside and gets to her feet. “The human is visiting her sister.”

“My thanks.” I do not wait to see if Asha is going to leave her cave. My feet are aching and now my back is, too. I will visit Mah-dee and Li-lah, and then I will return to my own cave, where my mate can fuss over me and I can hug my kit and be glad for my family.

My steps are a little heavier, a little more shuffling as I leave Asha’s cave and head for the small nook that is now the home of Rokan and his Li-lah. They are the newest pair to resonate in our small tribe and have not emerged from their cave much in the last hand of days, busy fulfilling the demands of resonance. I feel a little niggle of dread as I head toward their cave. It is early for something to go wrong with their mating. Li-lah might not even be with kit yet.

I stand outside, listening carefully. Their cave is silent, but the screen is removed from the entrance. Inside, I can hear the cozy crackle of a fire, and see the legs of a pale human seated near it. “May I come in?” I call out.

A moment later, Rokan emerges, unfolding his long body through the tight entrance. “Healer! Come in. You are always welcome at this fire.” He takes my arm and lets me lean on him as I walk in, like I am an elder instead of younger than him. Still, I am grateful for the help. I am increasingly tired and heartsick.

Mah-dee gets up from her stool and offers it to me, and I settle down near the fire. Li-lah immediately dips a cup into the tripod over the fire and offers the drink to me, making a gesture with her hand.

“I am sorry,” I say as I take the cup. “I have not had a chance to go to the Elders’ Cave to learn the hand-speak.” I let my fingertips touch hers as she hands me the cup. Li-lah is healthy...and not yet pregnant. Resonance will take a little longer yet.

“You are with kit,” Rokan says, making gestures with his hands even as he says the words so his mate can “listen.” “No one expects it of you.”

Always so thoughtful, Rokan. I smile at him and sip the tea.

“Besides,” Mah-dee says, doing the same handspeak-and-voice “It’s not like these two are leaving their cave much.” She makes a face at them. “I’d say get a room, but you already have one.”

Li-lah chuckles softly and makes a series of gestures, and Mah-dee snorts, quickly signing back. They gesture for a moment longer and then look at me.

“Lila wants to know if you think it’s a boy or a girl,” Mah-dee says, pointing to my belly. “Or is it impolite to ask?”

“It is not,” I murmur, a smile on my lips. “And I know which it is.”

“You do?” Mah-dee looks impressed. “Is that an alien thing?”

“It is a healer ‘thing’,” I agree.

“Maylak knows things,” Rokan says. “Like I do, but about bodies and wounds and healing.”

Something about that statement makes me pause. It feels significant, but before I can consider, Mah-dee speaks again.

“Lucky you.” Mah-dee makes a little gesture. “So do we get to find out? Boy or girl? There seem to be a lot of baby girls right now.”

I grin. “I will not say. Even my mate does not know.”

“Why not?” Mah-dee tilts her head.

“Because I want to surprise him.” I want to see the joy on his face when our kit is born and it is a male.

“Leverage,” Mah-dee says, and there’s a sly tone in her voice. She looks over at her sister and gestures again.

I do not follow, but that is not unusual when speaking with humans. So I smile politely and drink my tea quickly, draining the cup. Then I lean forward and hold it out to Mah-dee. “May I have more tea? It is very good.”

“Sure.” Mah-dee takes the cup, and her fingers touch mine. No sickness in either of the sisters. A good thing.

As I straighten, I glance over at Rokan. He has gone very still, his gaze on me. His expression is blank, but I sense he is thinking. After a moment, he offers me his hand, palm up.

He knows what I am doing.

She knows things, like me.

My eyes widen. Does he feel it? Did he wake up with the creeping dread as I did? I must know. But I do not want to frighten the others. So I put a bright smile on my face and look at the humans. “Did you know that Stay-see made cake?”

“Cake?” Mah-dee asks, gesturing to her sister. Li-lah puts a hand over her mouth in pleased surprise.

“I do not know if there is any left, but I am sure if you ask, she will make more.” I smooth my clothing over my hard, rounded belly.

Rokan just watches me.

“I’m game if Lila is,” Mah-dee says, hand-speaking to her sister.

Li-lah’s hands move, communicating, and then Mah-dee looks over at me. “Lila thinks you’re trying to get rid of us so you can talk to Rokan.”

I incline my head slightly. Li-lah is wise.

“Fair enough. I can be bribed with cake.” Mah-dee gets to her feet, and Li-lah does, too. Li-lah hesitates, and then goes to Rokan and kisses him on the mouth quickly before darting back to her sister’s side. I watch Rokan give his mate a scorching look as she exits.

Resonance is definitely ongoing for those two.

They leave, and the cave grows quiet again. I toy with my clothing, trying to seem calm and relaxed, though I do not feel it. There is too much going on in my head for me to be calm.

Rokan looks over at me after a moment, and his gaze is weary. “You feel it, too?”

*Y*ou feel it, too?

My heart clenches. "I do."

"What is it?"

He does not know? "I hoped you would have an answer."

Rokan rubs his chin thoughtfully. "And I the same."

I shift in my seat, uneasy and yet somehow relieved. Rokan feels the same way I do. I am not just a pregnant female seeing trouble where there is none. Something is wrong...or will be wrong. "I woke up this morning and I felt it," I tell him. "Subtle, but nagging. Like grit in the eye. I do not know what it is, just that I sense...something on the horizon." Even now, I feel the slight unease in the air, clinging like smoke.

"Is it your kit?" he asks. "Are you healthy?"

I shake my head. "I can...feel sickness, if that makes sense. My khui feels different around those that are unwell. This feels similar, yet different. So I have been visiting everyone, but no one is sick. I do not know what to make of it. I thought perhaps it was just me..."

"Until I spoke up," Rokan finishes. He continues to rub his chin. "It has bothered me for two days now."

I am surprised. "You said nothing?"

He shrugs. "It feels vague, like an idea more than anything else. And like you, I cannot find it centered on anyone."

"But you *do* feel it," I stress. Now I am even more worried. I am just a healer, but Rokan can sense things. He knows when a bad snowstorm will arrive, when game is scarce...he knows so many small things. "Is it the weather?"

"I do not think so. It is...difficult." He taps a finger on his chin and sits up, frustrated. "I cannot describe it, just that I know it lingers. Like a bad taste."

"Well, now we know all the things it is like," I say impatiently. "It is like a bad taste. It is like grit in the eye. It is all these things and yet we do not know what it actually is."

He raises his brow at me, surprised at my outburst. "Once I know what it is, I will say more."

I rub a hand over my face. "I know. I am just tired. And worried. I would much rather a broken arm than some nameless, formless problem I cannot see."

"I understand." Rokan takes a stick and pokes at the coals of the fire. "At first I thought it was my Li-lah, and my heart was filled with dread. I did not let her get out of our furs for a full day, worried there would be something that would happen if she stepped out of my sight. But when the feeling continued..." He trails off. "It worried me, and yet I am relieved. It is not Li-lah, and I feel bad because I am glad that whatever it is, it does not touch her."

I reach out and put my hand on his knee. "I know this feeling well. I have a mate and a kit, and another on the way. I wake up at night, worrying over them. It is because you love deeply. It will terrify you at times, but it is also a good thing."

The hollow-eyed look he gives me tells me there is much worrying going on in his head yet.

Concern prickles through me, and a new dread arises. “I cannot remember, Rokan. Did you have your ‘sense’ when the khui-sickness hit all those seasons ago? I was not yet a healer, so I do not know if this is the same.” My entire body clenches against the thought. *Please, do not let it be that. Anything but that.*

I want to cry with relief when he slowly shakes his head. “It is not the same. When the khui-sickness was here, it felt...” He makes a fist and clenches it over his chest. “Like a crushing sense of wrong. This just feels...slight. Unnerving.”

I exhale, pondering his words. He is right—this does not feel crushing. It feels like...a suggestion? An idea of a bad thing about to happen. “So what do we do?”

“We wait. What else can we do?”

“We can tell our chief. Vektal should know so we are prepared.”

“Prepared for *what?*”

He has a point, but still, our chief deserves to know. “Anything and everything.”

Rokan nods.

I put my hands in the air. “Help me up and we will go to his cave.”

Rokan helps me stand and then pauses. “I will go see Vektal. You should return to your cave.”

“No, I can go with you—”

“Maylak,” he says gently, and gives my hands a squeeze. “Can you not feel it? Your kit is on the way.”

In that moment, my body gives a powerful clench, a contraction ripping through me. I release his hands and double over, holding my belly.

“Your water is about to break, too,” he says, a hint of amusement in his voice. “Let me carry you back to your mate.”

I grab onto his tunic, fistfuls in my hands. Everything in my body that I have been ignoring, been pushing aside because I have been too busy, too worried—it is all coming to the surface. All day, my body—and my kit—has been sending me signals that my time is near, and I have been too distracted to notice. Now I feel it all: the change in my kit’s position inside my belly, the slow expansion of my flesh between my legs, the contractions that ripple through my hard stomach. I have been soothing it with small touches all day, focused on the well-being of my tribe.

Now my kit is desperate to be born.

Oh. I hesitate, because I must find out what is ailing the tribe. I must fix it because they depend on me to keep them safe and healthy.

“But—”

“Everything else can wait, healer. I promise you.” He helps me to stand upright and then begins to walk me toward the entrance of his cave. “Have your kit. I will speak with Vektal. We will come and see you later.”

I hesitate.

“Your water,” Rokan warns. “Very soon.”

I nod and shuffle out of the cave, clutching my stomach. The moment we are in the main tunnel, he swings me carefully into his arms. “Let us get you back to Kashrem, yes?”

Another contraction bears down on me. “My cave,” I agree, panting. “And hurry.” More pain tugs through my belly, and this time I do not use my healing to soothe it away.

My kit is coming, and each knot of pain that rises in my belly is a reminder that soon, I will have a new little face to greet.

Very, very soon.



A SHORT TIME LATER, I sit up in the furs and put my hands on my belly, letting my healing flow through my body. The birth was an easy one, thanks to my khui, but I still ache. I am exhausted. With a little bit of healing, I will recover that much faster.

Near the fire, my mate wipes the kit down with a wet, warm towel. There is a wide grin on his face that will not fade, and he touches the soft blue skin of our kit with reverence. Each tiny toe is counted, each small finger uncurled. "A boy," he murmurs, and looks over at me with love in his eyes. "You knew?"

I smile. "How could I not? He lived inside my body for season after season." I have been with kit for so long that now I feel a little empty and forlorn without the comforting feel of him in my belly. I smooth a hand over the soft mound of my stomach. It will tighten and grow flat again soon enough, and I am almost sad because I miss carrying my kit already.

But then Kashrem is moving to my side, our newest kit carefully cradled in his arms. He holds the tiny male out to me. He is a perfect, beautiful child. I remember Esha's face, squeezed and wrinkled with wailing, her little horns already budding. This kit is fat, and his horns are but suggestions on his little brow. His expression is sweet, his gaze calm as he stares at me with unblinking, dark eyes. My khui stirs in my chest as I take my kit into my arms, but there is no answering khui to reach out to. Not yet.

That vague sense of unease returns, but this time, it is different. This is a mother worrying over her vulnerable kit. I stroke my hand over the small head, nearly bald. "Not much hair."

"Not like Esha," my mate agrees, settling down next to me in the furs. His arm moves around my shoulders and he holds me close, pressing his mouth against my mane. "She had a full head of black and it stuck up like a puff-weed."

I chuckle, remembering. The kit in my arms blinks, and his little mouth moves, pursing. I cradle him against my breast and offer my nipple, and a moment later, he latches on. Fierce love rushes

through me and I have to blink back tears. Did I miss my rounded belly? It is nothing compared to holding this small life in my arms.

Kashrem nuzzles me again. "You are beautiful, my mate. I am the luckiest of males this day. I have a beautiful female at my side, a strong, healthy daughter, and now a son. My heart holds so much joy."

I touch his cheek as the kit nurses. He is strong, my new son. Healthy. I can see this even without a khui in his breast to speak to. "You wanted a boy."

"I did," Kashrem agrees. "It feels selfish, knowing that our tribe needs females so badly, but I cannot imagine loving another little girl as much as I do Esha. So I wanted a small son." He rubs my arm absently. "Of course, now that he is here, I cannot imagine loving him less or more than Esha. He is just different, and has already claimed another part of my heart."

I know exactly what he means. Little Esha left with Rokan so she would not be frightened of any cries I made while giving birth. I miss my daughter, though. I want her here. I want to show her the new brother she has, and see her charming smile. I want to hug her close and reassure myself that she is safe, even though I know she will be with Rokan and his Li-lah. I am just...worried. "A name?" I ask my mate, keeping my tone light. "Have you considered one?"

"I thought we might blend our names, as the humans do. Makash."

"A fierce name for such a sleepy kit." I smile down at the small bundle in my arms. I could watch the small face for hours, the fat cheeks working as Makash nurses.

"He will grow into his strong name," Kashrem says, giving my arm one last caress and then getting to his feet. "Better that he be a hunter than a tanner like his father."

I look up, frowning at such negative words. "Why does it matter?"

As I watch, my gentle Kashrem picks up his seldom-used spear and goes to the entrance of our tiny cave. He sits and watches out the

entrance, and his face is solemn.

“What is this?” I ask. This is not like my mate. My Kashrem is sweet of nature and not a fighter. I have never cared if he picked up a spear to hunt or if he cured a hide. Why the sudden change of heart?

“I have worried,” he says in a low voice, his hands gripping the spear awkwardly. His eyes glow as they fix on tiny Makash.

“Over the kit? But—”

He shakes his head. “Over what you said this morning when you woke. That something was wrong. And it made me think...should I be stronger to protect my family? Should I do more? Should I hunt? Be fierce like Hassen and Bek?” He gazes down at the spear in his hands as if it is foreign to him. “Will that help?”

“My mate,” I say softly, calling to him. I hold my hand out, waiting.

He gazes down at the spear, then sighs and casts it aside. He moves over to my side and kneels, then cups my face in his hands. “I want to be enough. Enough for you, enough of a father for Esha and Makash.”

“You *are*. Never doubt that.” I stroke his hand and hold it there, against my cheek. “Do not think you have to be anything other than who you are.”

“But the danger—”

“Could be nothing,” I say firmly. “I spoke with Rokan, and he feels the same unease, but it is not like the khui-sickness from before. We do not know what it is, and it might be something as simple as bad weather this brutal season.” It feels like a lie against my teeth, but seeing the worry on my mate’s face disappear is worth it.

“I want to protect you,” Kashrem says fiercely. “You are my female. My mate. The mother of my kits.”

“A mother who is busy tending a tribe that grows every day,” I say softly. I nuzzle his hand and then look up at him again. “A mother

with two very young kits who is thankful that she has a husband not out on the trails, because it lets her focus on helping all.”

My words soothe some of the tension from his shoulders. “Why do you always know the right thing to say to ease my heart?”

“Because I am the healer,” I say gently. “And your mate. My duty is to know you and to know how to heal you in all ways.”

He gazes down at Makash, then chuckles. “He has fallen asleep feeding.”

I glance down and our small son’s little mouth quivers, as if trying to latch on in sleep. I lift him to my shoulder and rub his back, waiting for the inevitable belch. When it is done, I swaddle him in soft furs and then hold him out to his father.

The look of love on Kashrem’s face as he takes his son in his arms makes me melt and fills me with fierce protectiveness. We do not require a hunter in our family. I am the healer. I will keep my family strong and safe with my healing. The tribe provides food for us in thanks. There is no more that is needed.

And I feel guilty that my worry has bled over to my mate. This is why a healer has so many secrets. Because sometimes they should not be spoken until they have turned into something that can be healed away with a touch. I have made my mate worry over formless dangers that might never come to light. And yet...I cannot hold these things back from my mate. He is my heart. He is the only one I can share my burdens with.

“I know that look on your face,” he murmurs, even as he gently rocks Makash in his arms.

“What look?” I straighten my clothing, wrapping my tender breasts with a chest-wrap like I have seen the human females do.

“The look that says you regret sharing your worries with me.” The smile he gives me is wise. “But I would not have it any other way.”

“Me either,” I say softly. Even a healer must lean on another. I fuss with the blankets, feeling strangely vulnerable at how well he knows me. “Is the privacy screen over the entrance? Rokan and Vektal will be by soon to talk about the bad feeling and what we can do.”

He sets the kit down in a new basket—a basket woven by my mate, with cleverly colored cordage that gives it a decorative pattern—and then goes to the entrance and moves the screen. He returns a moment later, and Vektal and Rokan both are behind him.

“Healer,” Vektal says, nodding at me. “Is your new kit well?”

Kashrem raises a hand, stopping both hunters before they can sit down. “My mate just gave birth. It is only because she wants you here that I removed the screen at all. You will say what you need, and quickly, and then she will rest.”

Rokan’s eyes go wide, but he is grinning. Vektal just nods, his lips twitching with amusement. “You are fierce tonight, Kashrem.”

“My mate looked after the tribe all day and then came home to give birth to my son. Of course I am fierce. She will not stop until she is certain all are well, so I will make sure that she rests.” He gives his chief a firm nod, and then the same at me. “So do not sit, because you will not be here long.”

I chuckle and pull the furs up closer around my waist. He is right; I am tired. My eyelids are heavy and I want nothing more than to sleep, but it feels that there is so much to do.

Vektal comes to stand near the furs and then glances over at Kashrem before squatting at my bedside. “Tell me more about your concerns.”

I look at Rokan, who nods, and then I speak. I tell my chief of waking up with my worries, and my visits to check on the tribe. I tell him of my doubts, because I cannot point to a specific thing causing my worry. It is just there, waiting. “I do not know what to make of it,” I say at last. “I would think it is just the worries of a pregnant female, but Rokan shares them.”

“Yes, and I am not pregnant,” Rokan says, straight-faced.

Vektal just gives Rokan a patient look, and then turns back to me.

“And you are sure it is not focused on your new kit?”

“Makash is strong,” I say proudly. “Very healthy.”

My chief grunts. “It is a good name.”

“It is.”

Vektal turns to Rokan. “Could it be related to the khui hunt that we must do for Makash? We will need to go soon.”

Rokan thinks, and then shakes his head. “It does not feel like hunting danger.”

“And not weather?”

Rokan shakes his head again.

“And it is focused on the tribe?”

“It feels that way,” I say. In the light of all the questions, I wonder if I am imagining things. Everyone is healthy. No one is sick. I see on Rokan’s face that he wonders the same thing. So I ask, “Are we seeing smoke where there is no fire?”

Vektal is silent for a long moment, gazing down at me. Then he speaks. “I have never known you to panic, Maylak. You are steady and unwavering. If you have worries, we will listen.”

“But I do not know what it is I worry over,” I fret.

“Then we wait,” Vektal says. “We remain watchful and we wait for whatever it is to happen.” He gets to his feet slowly. “My Georgie has a human expression—a calm before the storm. Perhaps that is what this is.”

“But then what is the storm?” Rokan asks.

Vektal spreads his hands. “We do not know yet.”

I look helplessly at Rokan. "So what do we do?"

"Enjoy the calm," Vektal says. "Say nothing to the others. There is no sense in spreading panic. Until then, enjoy each day, each hour with your family."

I look at their serious faces, and then back to my own mate. "That is no answer, my chief."

"It is because I have none." Vektal's face looks momentarily bleak, but then his expression changes to determination. "We will not be caught unawares, whatever this is. We will watch the weather. We will gather more food supplies, more fire supplies. We will send hunters out in pairs instead of alone. We will be safe." He closes a fist and rests it atop his flat palm. "If we can prevent this from happening, we will."

"Very well," I say softly. "There is more I can do. I can work with Kemli and gather more healing herbs. Make more medicinal teas. I can watch the pregnant ones even closer." And the ones I secretly have an eye on, like Har-loh and Analay.

"*You* will sleep," my mate says, striding forward and putting himself between my chief and my bedside. He gives the two men a stern look. "She is tired. Let her rest. You can worry more tomorrow."

"As you wish, fierce one." Vektal nods at me, and then at Kashrem. "Bring your Makash by when you are rested, healer. My Georgie will want to hold him."

"I will," I promise.

The two hunters leave, and Kashrem puts the screen back over the entrance. He rubs his face and then walks to my side, footsteps heavy, before dropping down into the furs. He puts his arms around me and buries his face against my shoulder.

I play with his sleek braids. "Long day?" I tease.

"I worry over my mate even if she does not. Someone must make our tireless healer get her rest." He lets his fingers trace over my

skin. “And I worry over what Vektal says. If there is a problem—”

“Then we wait until it surfaces,” I assure my mate. “He is right. We cannot live every day worrying over a formless, nameless thing.”

“Enjoy the calm,” Kashrem agrees, holding me close. “Easier than it sounds.”

Over in the basket, Makash hiccups and then begins to cry.

Despite my exhaustion, I chuckle. “Much easier than it sounds, especially with a newborn kit.”

“I will get him.” My mate climbs to his feet again and moves to the basket. He picks up the bundle, rocking Makash in his arms as he returns to my side.

I watch them, and my resolve is strengthened. Vektal is right. We live in a dangerous world. There are threats every day, and we cannot live in fear of them. We will wait. We will prepare. We will keep our secrets, and we will hope for the best.

And until then, we enjoy the calm.

I hold my arms out for my new son, and smile.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Well, wasn't that a fun tease? I hope you enjoyed the little glimpse into Maylak's headspace. I wanted to show things from her perspective—as both integral part of the tribe and worrywart—as well as check in with several of our other couples. I hope you enjoyed this! As Maylak says, it's a little bit of calm, right before the storm.

Speaking of storms...Maddie's book, *BARBARIAN'S TAMING*, will be out right at the end of summer, and I'm thinking it's going to be a game changer for our aliens in many ways.

I hope you enjoyed this little taste and it'll get you through until the next full-length release. As always, thank you for being a fan. I really do have the best ones on the planet!

<3

Ruby

MOVING DAY

FARLI

Cham-pee bites at the cuff of my leggings as I walk through the cave, nearly tripping me.

“Cham-pee! Stop it! I am trying to carry these blankets!”

He bleats at me, looking so funny and so very sa-khui in his outrage that I laugh. I cannot be angry at his furry little face. When he gets indignant, he reminds me of Bek in one of his moods, which just makes me laugh harder.

Hands grab the tall stack of blankets from me, and I am surprised to see it is Bek. I am not surprised to see he is scowling.

“My thanks,” I tell him, grabbing Cham-pee before he can attack Bek’s leggings.

“You must be more careful,” he tells me in a flat, angry voice. “You nearly stepped into Hemalo’s hides.”

I look over in surprise. Sure enough, Hemalo has set up his skinning tools just outside the cave the unmarried hunters share. It is in the way of the normal paths through the tribal cave, but I suppose he cannot set it up in his own cave anymore, now that he has moved out. “Oh. I did not see—”

“Clearly.” Bek nods at me. “Now, where do you take these?”

“I am going to get Mah-dee,” I tell him, ignoring his foul mood. “Today is her moving day.”

He grunts. “I will carry this for you so you do not hurt yourself.”

“And so you can see Mah-dee?” I tease.

A scowl darkens on his face. I have probably pushed too far, judging from his reaction. I do not care. Bek needs a kick in the tail after several moons of his sourness. The only one he is kind to anymore is the human Claire. I think he misses her. But he only says, “Where is the human, then?”

I shrug. “Where did she sleep last night during the celebration? In which cave?”

He does not know, and I do not either, so we start peering into the caves with no screens. If she has bedded down with a hunter, we will find her soon enough. This is a cave with few secrets...though I think if she has bedded down with someone, I will lose Bek’s assistance.

We find Vaza before we find Mah-dee. He is all smiles as he spies us, a basket in his hands. “Have you seen the human Mah-dee? I wanted to give her a basket.”

I smother my amusement behind my hand. Vaza is so obvious. So is Bek, actually. He scowls at his competition. “Why does she need a basket?”

Vaza gazes down at the basket in his hands and then shrugs. “Does not everyone need a good basket?”

“I am sure she will be grateful.” And a giggle slips out of me.

Both Bek and Vaza frown at me. Cham-pee bleats and bites at my chin. I release my little dvisti and he immediately scampers away, thinking we are playing a chase game. I do not follow.

The chase game that is unfolding is far too interesting.

“Perhaps she is sleeping in one of the storage caves,” I suggest. “I will go look.”

They do not pay attention to me. They are too busy glaring at each other. “She can make her own basket,” Bek snarls at Vaza.

“She can make her own blankets, too!”

“I am helping Farli. You are just stalking her like a snow-cat, like you always do.”

“As if you are one to speak,” Vaza hisses. “You had a human and you lost her. Let others have a chance!”

I roll my eyes like Leezh does when she is annoyed.

Every time a human female is unmated, it is the same story with the unmated males. They make fools of themselves to push their way into her presence, hoping for a pleasure-mate, if not resonance. Now that there is only one unmated female again, they grow more desperate and more angry in their conversations to each other. Some of the hunters—like Harrec and Warrek—do not bother to chase the females. They figure if it is meant to be, resonance will bring them together. The pushier ones like Bek do their best to help things along.

I find it exasperating...but also a little exciting. In a few seasons, I will be a woman, old enough to be courted. Will they chase after me as heatedly as they do Mah-dee? The thought of all that attention makes my stomach flutter. I do not know that I want Vaza or Bek, but it is still exciting to think about. I pat my flat chest. Still no teats. I have a season or two yet.

I sigh. I am ready to grow up.

I leave the two hunters behind to bicker, and search the caves. In a pile of extra furs in the back of the storage cave, I find Mah-dee. She has slept in my family’s cave since arriving, because we have a larger one, but she did not return last night. “Good morning,” I call out to her as I approach. “Wake! It is time for your moving day!”

Mah-dee sits up blearily, her yellow mane a snarl on her head. “Why are you here and so loud?”

“Am I loud?” Behind me, Cham-pee bleats at the entrance of the cave as if to agree. “I am sorry,” I whisper. “Is this better?”

“I think I’m hungover,” Mah-dee says, rubbing her face. “That sah sah is some potent shit.”

I gasp. “It was bad?” I have heard “shit” many times from the humans, but they usually say it when they refer to dung. “Oshen will be so displeased—”

“No, no,” she says quickly. “Potent *stuff*. Stuff. I misspoke.”

Oh.

“Where is my sister?” She straightens her clothing and peers around. “Is she awake?”

I giggle. “We will not see much of them all day, I think. They are resonating.” It is so exciting to think about. I picture Rokan and how he gazes at his new mate, and a little sigh escapes me. I want a male to look at me like that. Then I wrinkle my nose. Not Vaza or Bek, though. Someone nicer. Maybe Taushen.

Mah-dee just gives an unhappy little groan and lies back down in bed. She pulls the blankets over her head. “I hate this place.”

I giggle and reach forward to tug the blankets down again. “You are so silly.” I have gotten to know Mah-dee well in the last few weeks. She says many sour things, but she is just sad and lonely and in need of friends. “Today is a good day. You are getting your own cave!”

She lets me pull the blankets down, and there’s a thoughtful look on her face. “I am? I’m not going to stay with my sister?”

“No, you will be caving with Asha,” I tell her. “It is a girls’ cave!” The thought is very exciting to me. Maybe when I am old enough, I can

cave with them. We can braid each others' hair and make clothes together and share secrets.

"I guess that's fine. I didn't really want to hear my sister nailing her new boyfriend all the time," Mah-dee says after a moment. The look on her face grows sad again.

"Not friend," I correct her. "Mate. And they are not *nay-ling*, they are mating."

"Right. My bad."

"Bad?"

"Never mind." She sits up and Cham-pee immediately races forward and grabs a corner of her blanket, shaking it wildly. A small smile touches her sad face, and she reaches out to rub his head. "All right, let's see the new place."

When Mah-dee and I emerge from the storage cave, both Bek and Vaza visibly puff up their chests. If Mah-dee notices, though, she is silent. She remains at my side as I lead her through the tribal cave, and pays no attention to the men that race to be near her. I do not think Mah-dee is interested in a mate at this time, even a pleasure-mate.

Though if I were going to pick a pleasure-mate, I would not pick Vaza either. He is too old, and females have their pick of the unmated hunters.

Asha's cave has no privacy screen in front, so I enter. Inside, the fire pit is dark, and there is one bundle of furs in the back of the cave.

"Asha?" I call out.

The bundle of furs stirs. "Go away, Farli."

"It is not early," I tell her. "You should be awake."

"Why?" Her voice is tired. "What is the point?"

The point? How silly. "There is so much to be done. Here, I will start your fire pit. And today we must move Mah-dee into your cave."

Where are your fire-making tools?" I squat beside the ring of rocks.

"Move Mah-dee in?" Asha sits up and her hands go to her hair to braid it. As she sits up, a tiny bit of fur drops to the floor. She snatches it up quickly, but not before I see it. It is a tunic, kit-sized.

Poor Asha. She misses her little Hashala so. I only have vague memories of the kit from several seasons ago, just that she was pale, pale blue and so tiny. Born too early, I am told. It happens, I am told. It is rare. All this, I am told so I do not fret with fear for when it is time for me to carry a kit. The tribe grieves, and then life goes on... for all but Asha, I think. In her heart, she still weeps.

So I smile brightly at her as if Mah-dee moving in with her is the best thing to ever happen. "You and Mah-dee, yes. Vektal says we will have the single women in a cave together."

"Single? But I am mated to Hemalo, you forget." Her lip curls slightly as she says his name. The others are filing into the cave as we speak, and Asha's gaze flicks to the others.

"Hemalo has broken the mating," Bek says flatly. "He has moved in with the hunters."

"Bek!" I am horrified at his callous words, because it is clear this is not known to Asha. Her expression goes tight, her eyes bleak. She looks at me, and I nod slowly. It is true.

"He said nothing to me." She gives a small, bitter laugh. "Though I do not know why this surprises me. He says nothing to me anymore." Her gaze moves past Bek and Vaza to Mah-dee. "Welcome to the cave of rejected females."

"Ouch," Mah-dee says. "Hello to you, too."

Asha just grabs her blankets and lies down again. She turns and faces the wall of her cave, shutting us out. "Put up the privacy screen when you leave," she tells us.

I glare at Bek. That could have been handled nicer. Asha is clearly hurt.

“Would...would you like a basket, Asha?” Vaza offers.

“Enough with the basket,” Bek snaps, elbowing the hunter aside. “No one wants *your* basket.”

Mah-dee looks at me, a mixture of confusion and helplessness on her face. “Is this a bad time?” she whispers.

“There are no good times for this,” I whisper back. “Let us just set up your furs and go out for the day. We can take Cham-pee for a walk.”

“All right,” Mah-dee says. Bek gives her an expectant look, and then she gazes around the cave before turning back to me. “Do we just set down anywhere?”

“Asha?” I ask.

“Anywhere. I do not care.” Her voice is dull and lifeless, and she does not turn to look at us. “Just leave me alone.”

Mah-dee and I exchange a look. Vaza just puts his basket next to her furs. We set Mah-dee’s things down and then quietly exit the cave.

“Well, that was awkward,” Mah-dee says when Bek has placed the privacy screen over the entrance. “And don’t I just feel so welcome.”

“I can make you a basket,” Vaza says. “Since that one is now hers. It would bring me great joy.”

Bek just snorts.

Mah-dee’s nostrils flare and she gives me a worried look.

“Mah-dee and I are going to go gathering and walk Cham-pee,” I tell them. “We have much to do.” I take her arm and steer her away from the males before they can start arguing amongst themselves again. The human does not protest and lets me lead her to the front of the cave before she shivers, and I forget that she is human and not dressed for the snow. “Wait here,” I tell her. “I’ll get some of my furs for you to wear.”

“I’m twice your size, Farli,” Mah-dee says, rubbing her arms. “Maybe I should just wait for Lila to wake up?” The look on her face is hopeful.

Poor Mah-dee. She is not very familiar with resonance. “You will be waiting a long time. Resonance will not let them rest until she is with kit. When Jo-see and Haeden resonated, we did not see them for days.” I giggle. “Though we heard them plenty.”

“Ew, thanks for that,” Mah-dee says. She kneels by Cham-pee and rubs his pointy little face. “So my sister doesn’t need anyone but her man, and my new cave-buddy doesn’t want company. Where does that leave me?” She makes kissy faces at Cham-pee and starts speaking in a funny voice that I have heard the other humans make at their kits. “Where does that leave us, lil’ buddy? Are we totally fucked? Yes we are, aren’t we? Yes, yes we are. We are totally screwed aren’t we?”

I frown at her, trying to figure her words out. “You are not left anywhere. You are with me.”

Mah-dee stops making goofy faces at the dvisti and her expression changes, a little smile gracing her funny human mouth. “I guess so. Thanks, Farli. You’re good people.”

“Are there bad people?”

“Figure of speech.” She rubs her arms again, and Cham-pee snaps at her fingers, thinking it a game. “Let’s get those furs, shall we?”

I nod, studying her before turning. Humans are so strange. It has been many turns of the moon since the humans arrived and I still do not understand them sometimes.

THE PEOPLE OF ICE PLANET BARBARIANS

As of the end of CALM

(suggested pronunciations in parenthesis)

AT THE MAIN TRIBAL CAVE

CAVE 1

VEKTAL (VEHK-TALL) - THE CHIEF OF THE SA-KHUI. MATED TO GEORGIE.

GEORGIE – HUMAN WOMAN (AND UNOFFICIAL LEADER OF THE HUMAN FEMALES). HAS TAKEN ON A DUAL-LEADERSHIP ROLE WITH HER MATE.

TALIE (TAH-LEE) – THEIR BABY DAUGHTER.

CAVE 2

MAYLAK (MAY-LACK) – TRIBE HEALER. MATED TO KASHREM. MOTHER OF ESHA AND MAKASH.

KASHREM (CASH-REHM) - HER MATE, ALSO A LEATHER-WORKER.

ESHA (ESH-UH) – THEIR YOUNG DAUGHTER.

MAKASH (MUH-CASH) — THEIR NEWBORN SON.

CAVE 3

SEVAH (SEV-UH) – TRIBE ELDER, MOTHER TO AEHAKE, ROKAN, AND SESSAH

OSHEN (AW-SHEN) – TRIBE ELDER, HER MATE

SESSAH (SES-UH) - THEIR YOUNGEST SON

CAVE 4

WARREK (WAR-EHK) – TRIBAL HUNTER AND TEACHER.

EKLAN (EHK-LAN) – HIS FATHER. ELDER.

CAVE 5

EREVEN (AIR-UH-VEN) HUNTER, MATED TO CLAIRE

CLAIRE – MATED TO EREVEN, CURRENTLY PREGNANT

CAVE 6

LIZ – RAAHOSH’S MATE AND HUNTRESS. CURRENTLY PREGNANT FOR A SECOND TIME.

RAAHOSH (RAH-HOSH) – HER MATE. A HUNTER AND BROTHER TO RUKH.

RAASHEL (RAH-SHEL) – THEIR DAUGHTER.

CAVE 7

STACY – MATED TO PASHOV. MOTHER TO PACY, A BABY BOY.

PASHOV (PAH-SHOWV) – SON OF KEMLI AND BORRAN, BROTHER TO FARLI AND SALUKH. MATE OF STACY, FATHER TO PACY.

PACY – THEIR INFANT SON.

CAVE 8

NORA – MATE TO DAGESH, MOTHER TO TWINS ANNA AND ELSA.

DAGESH (DAH-ZZHESH) (THE G SOUND IS SWALLOWED) – HER MATE. A HUNTER.

ANNA & ELSA – THEIR INFANT TWIN DAUGHTERS.

CAVE 9

HARLOW – MATE TO RUKH. 'MECHANIC' TO THE ELDERS' CAVE. SPENDS 75% OF HER TIME THERE WITH HER FAMILY.

RUKH (ROOKH) – FORMER EXILE AND LONER. ORIGINAL NAME MAARUKH. (MAH-ROOKH). BROTHER TO RAAHOSH. MATE TO HARLOW.

RUKHAR (ROO-CAR) – THEIR INFANT SON.

CAVE 10

MEGAN – MATE TO CASHOL. MOTHER TO NEWBORN HOLVEK.

CASHOL – (CASH-AWL) – MATE TO MEGAN. HUNTER. FATHER TO NEWBORN HOLVEK.

HOLVEK – (HAUL-VEHK) – THEIR INFANT SON.

CAVE 11

MARLENE (MAR-LENN) – HUMAN MATE TO ZENNEK. HAS UNNAMED CHILD. FRENCH.

ZENNEK – (ZEHN-ECK) – MATE TO MARLENE. HAS UNNAMED CHILD.

CAVE 12

ARIANA – HUMAN FEMALE. MATE TO ZOLAYA. MOTHER TO ANALAY.

ZOLAYA (ZOH-LAY-UH) – HUNTER AND MATE TO ARIANA. FATHER TO ANALAY.

ANALAY – (AH-NUH-LAY) – THEIR INFANT SON.

CAVE 13

TIFFANY – HUMAN FEMALE. MATED TO SALUKH AND NEWLY PREGNANT.

SALUKH - SALUKH (SAH-LUKE) – HUNTER. SON OF KEMLI AND BORRAN, BROTHER TO FARLI AND PASHOV.

CAVE 14

AEHAKO – (EYE-HA-KOH) – ACTING LEADER OF THE SOUTH CAVE. MATE TO KIRA, FATHER TO KAE. SON OF SEVVAH AND OSHEN, BROTHER TO ROKAN AND SESSAH.

KIRA – HUMAN WOMAN, MATE TO AEHAKO, MOTHER OF KAE. WAS THE FIRST TO BE ABDUCTED BY ALIENS AND WORE AN EAR-TRANSLATOR FOR A LONG TIME.

KAE (KI –RHYMES WITH ‘FLY’) – THEIR NEWBORN DAUGHTER.

CAVE 15

KEMLI – (KEMM-LEE) FEMALE ELDER, MOTHER TO SALUKH, PASHOV AND FARLI

BORRAN – (BORE-AWN) HER MATE, ELDER

FARLI – (FAR-LEE) THEIR TEENAGE DAUGHTER. HER BROTHERS ARE SALUKH AND PASHOV. SHE HAS A PET DVISTI NAMED CHAHM-PEE (CHOMPY).

CAVE 16

DRAYAN (DRY-ANN) – ELDER.

DRENOL (DREE-NOWL) – ELDER.

CAVE 17

VADREN (VAW-DREN) – ELDER.

VAZA (VAW-ZHUH) – WIDOWER AND ELDER. LOVES TO CREEP ON THE LADIES.

CAVE 18

ASHA (AH-SHUH) – SEPARATED FROM HEMALO. NO LIVING CHILD.

MADDIE – LILA’S SISTER. FOUND IN SECOND CRASH. CURRENTLY UNMATED.

CAVE 19

BEK – (BEHK) – HUNTER.

HASSEN (HASS-EN) – HUNTER.

HARREC (HAIR-EK) – HUNTER.

TAUSHEN (TOW –RHYMES WITH COW- SHEN) – HUNTER.

HEMALO (HEE-MAH-LO) – SEPARATED FROM ASHA.

CAVE 20

JOSIE – HUMAN WOMAN. MATED TO HAEDEN AND NEWLY PREGNANT.

HAEDEN (HI-DEN) – HUNTER. PREVIOUSLY RESONATED TO ZALAH BUT SHE DIED (ALONG WITH HIS KHUI) IN THE KHUI-SICKNESS BEFORE RESONANCE COULD BE COMPLETED. NOW MATED TO JOSIE.

CAVE 21 (FORMERLY A STORAGE CAVE)

ROKAN (ROW-CAN) – OLDEST SON TO SEVVAH AND OSHEN. BROTHER TO AEHAKO AND SESSAH. ADULT MALE HUNTER. NOW MATED TO LILA. HAS ‘SIXTH’ SENSE.

LILA – MADDIE’S SISTER. HEARING IMPAIRED. RESONATED TO ROKAN.

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AFTERWORD

For more information about upcoming books in the Ice Planet Barbarians, Bear Bites, or any other books by Ruby Dixon, like me on [Facebook](#) or [subscribe to my new release newsletter](#).

THANKS FOR READING!

<3 RUBY

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